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Wounding Poppies: hyper-commemoration and aesthetic interventions

D-M Withers

In Britain the centenary of the First World War has generated new state-funded aesthetic, cultural, and educational activities. The red poppy has often been the focal point of artistic interventions, as artists have created works that respond to the potency of a symbol that has become, within a culture of hyper-commemoration, a ubiquitous part of everyday life. This Encounters piece offers a personal reflection on the aesthetic and social meanings of the red poppy, exploring how an intimate relationship with the mnemonic object is traversed by the public politics of the British nation-state. It contrasts two different artistic approaches to the red poppy – *Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red* by Paul Cummins and Gail Ritchie's *Wounded Poppies* – to argue for the importance of artistic practices that can contest and re-contextualize familiar symbolic objects that have accrued narrow, and affectively persuasive, political meanings.

KEYWORDS: *commemoration, remembrance, aesthetics, red poppy, memory*

As long as I can remember, red poppies have been a part of the everyday rhythm of life. As a child, my existence was imprinted by a cheap configuration of red paper petal, green plastic stem and black, round button. Red poppies appeared and disappeared. Sometimes I dis-membered my poppy – ripping the paper and pulling each layer apart. Nothing malicious was intended. This was just ponderous child's play. I was gaining external sense of the object; did this equate grasping the meaning, carried within and by it? A year later, a new intact poppy returned, always pinned proudly to my school jumper. The trajectory felt ephemeral, yet certain and habitual. Banally I learnt: my destructive act was not catastrophic but simply part of the ebb and flow of existence.

The annual remembrance ceremonies synchronized my movement into the world of red poppy wearers. Standing at a crowded cenotaph, surrounded by poppy-covered lapels that towered my infant frame, I confronted solemn practices of collective mourning, totem-like embodiments of 'experiences I have not myself lived but that I have nevertheless *adopted [...] collective, common, inherited by everyone* as the past of everyone' (Stiegler 2011: 112-113, italics in original). The red poppy, mnemonic pillar of British society in the 20th and 21st centuries, stood firm as the threshold of belonging I had to be part of. A culture where the fallen are mourned and victims marginalized – a peculiar perpetuation of war's glory. Artful mediator of public and private memory (Andrews 2014); the poppy was the vehicle for forgetting how the pomp of state orchestrated commemorative activities *get inside* the life of citizens, regulating inner feelings and outward expressions through everyday demands of allegiance and gesture (Basham 2016).

'What "the" poppy signifies is, like all symbols, unstable' (2014: 109), Andrews asserts, confidently. With what certainty can it be claimed the red poppy will *always* circulate as a symbol people *can* contest, especially given current policies of the British state that orchestrate its monolithic signification? Andrews *et al* note 'the increasingly significant place given to remembrance and commemoration at the heart of the British cultural and political terrain' (Andrews et al 2011: 283). Within the

fraught political context of the early 21st century, remembrance is a calendric and affective activity used to foster cohesion in Britain's fragmented multi-cultural society - an 'imagined community' constructed through practices of mourning (Basham 2016; Andrews *et al* 2011: 284).

The centenary of the First World War (2014-2018) has intensified commemorative practices with the red poppy acquiring new prominence in the cultural, affective, political and aesthetic life in Britain. This is an affective-cultural context of *hyper-commemoration*, within which practices of remembrance, from their inception mediated by mass technologies like radio (Andrews 2014), are elevated to a new level of spectacle (Debord, 1995). Hyper-commemorative spectacle congeals in grandiose aesthetic projects such as Paul Cummins's popular, *Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red*, which installed 888, 246 red ceramic poppies in the Moat at the Tower of London in 2014. Parts of the installation, *Wave and Weeping Window*, toured the UK before becoming a permanent exhibition in Imperial War Museums in 2018. Hyper-commemorative spectacle is enhanced by celebrity endorsements of the poppy campaign, and the proliferation of branded consumer goods that place remembrance at the heart of gendered constructions of the heteronormative nation-state (Basham 2016). Remembrance, once a calendric activity connected to ritualistic two-minute's silence on Armistice Day on or around the 11 November, has become a contagious dimension of everyday life in Britain (Basham 2016). The carrier of the remembrance message is compressed into the ubiquitous red poppy. At first a temporary symbol pinned to lapels, the red poppy has acquired size and durable, plastic forms. Plastic poppies have claimed a new prominence in public space attached to buildings in towns and cities. They have acquired mobility, too, gracing lorries and cars that move around the country all year round. The British nation-state is characterized by a condition of *continuous remembrance*. The red poppy is the symbolic marker and threshold of this condition.

While the meaning of remembrance in general, and the red poppy in particular, may *ideally* be unstable, it is increasingly *regulated* through these affective, commercial, cultural aesthetic and state-mandated activities. As Andrews notes, it is 'almost obligatory for anyone in the public eye or media to wear a poppy in November, and the poppy has gained an almost sacred status' (2014: 109). The red poppy – and the cultural-affective practices it encourages – deeply resonates with the populace. Hugely popular, red poppies grip remembrance loyalists in an accelerated symbolic addiction – a state where collective mourning verges on euphoria. *Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red* generated an outpouring of civic commemoration, over 5 million people made site visits to the Tower of London to see it. This was extended through social media posts (34 million Facebook and 6.3 million Twitter impressions), to laying spontaneous personalised tributes to British soldiers who died in wars from the nineteenth to twenty-first centuries (Gooch 2017). The extent of this activity is irrefutable, and most tributes endorsed the artwork's message, signalling collective consensus to the red poppy's meaning, and its central location in British cultural, political and social life. Dissenting voices were the exception. Megan Gooch, Learning Producer at Historic Royal Palaces, noted one white poppy, a counter-symbol first mobilised in 1933 to promote pacifism and peace, laid at the tower – a symbolic expression of a different attitude to war and mourning. Like all other public tributes laid down, the materials were removed at the end of each day to avoid

environmental damage, kept by Historic Royal Palaces as non-accessioned items in their archive collections.

Besides the importance of events that enable public expressions of grief – why is there such affective and gestural *consensus* about the red poppy? Can we be pragmatic? *Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red* was designed to mourn soldiers who died in wars and could never accommodate a pacifist message. Alternative meanings are not *contained* within the red poppy; the petals mark the parameters of how feelings about war, within a nation-state continually *at war*, can be publicly articulated. Is the power of the red poppy in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries sustained because British people have largely been insulated from the lived devastation of wars waged by its state, which export its violence – and the complex political rationale for doing so – to an opaque elsewhere? The centenary occasion of the First World War in Britain has instrumentalised aesthetic forms that re-energise allegiance to the red poppy in everyday life. Dissent in the face of the ‘sacred’ (Andrew 2014: 109) red poppy in this context would be nothing other than a social accident, a wholly *inappropriate* response that jars against the wisdom of the crowd.

Jenny Kidd and Joanne Sayner’s research has explored responses to Cummings’s installation as it toured the UK (2017). It is telling that the most complex reception they uncovered was in Belfast, Northern Ireland, where ‘texts and practices of Remembrance’ have ‘come to be seen as part of the symbolism of Loyalism, imperialism and Britishness’ (Poulter 2017: 4). And it is in the work of Northern Irish visual artist Gail Ritchie we find interesting responses to a hyper-commemorative condition symbolised by the proliferative red poppy. Her work seeks to materially re-contextualise the red poppy so that its meanings might be re-opened again, or at least dis-lodged from their current, spectacular, fixity. ‘Wounded Poppies’ (2009) is a series of 36 watercolour drawings on paper, 30cm x 20cm, inspired by a wider programme of artistic *re-search* wherein Ritchie recovered the memory of her great-grandfather Frank, a member of the 36th Ulster division who died at an unspecified location during the Great War (Ritchie 2015). Ritchie visited the banks of the Somme where she picked poppies growing there. Alongside poppies picked in Germany, Spain and Ireland, these flowers were then ‘pressed into sketch books, their petals crumpled and the colours faded from blood red to pink. They were then painted individually in watercolour. I kept the seeds and scattered them in fields around my locale’ (Ritchie 2015). ‘Wounded Poppies’ disturb the symbolic iconography of the red poppy, re-inscribing their vulnerabilities. Already frail and dead, Ritchie’s poppies are cared for yet diluted through their watercolour medium. ‘Wounded Poppies’ present multi-dimensional perspectives from which to look (again) at the poppies. The poppy *can be* approached from different angles. This creates a subtle spatial dis-orientation, de-familiarisation of the normatively flat, mnemonic-symbolic object. The edges of Ritchie’s ‘Wounded Poppies’ are porous and at times spectral; they foreground delicate folds and appear in a range of colours, white spots to pink intensities; blood red, evocative of maimed bodies, and menstruation. As an aesthetic construction ‘Wounded Poppies’ support the interpretive complexity of the symbolic object. They disturb meanings that otherwise appear fixed and locked down within a system of known, socialised references, a stark contrast to works such as *Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red*, an aesthetic project that collapses the interpretation into an assumed and correct response, narrowly permissive of a select number of feelings, responses and meanings.

The planting of seeds in and around her locale extends Ritchie's material re-contextualisation of the poppies. The artist's action enables us to think a difficult question: what can be done with material symbols of memory that intimately exist around us? How possible is it to transform them, when they are lodged in the world in specific ways? After all, red poppies are not exterior to society. They are planted within us, and our consciousness. In British society over the past 100 years, red poppies have become an inextricable part of how a deliberately constructed 'We' thinks questions of justice, suffering, remembering and forgetting. And, as Ritchie points out, red poppies have material significance for conflicts that continue in the 21st century: the narcotic crops that grow in the fields of Afghanistan is the location where a different generation of civilians and soldiers become casualties for new wars propagated by the British state.

Combined, Ritchie's re-contextualisations mark out a space of dwelling and doubt before the poppy symbol. Her intervention makes the familiar, flat red poppy of the lapel, and the glistening re-energised mass-spectacle of ceramic poppies, unfamiliar. Poppies become material again, connected to a plurality of living, contentious histories. This is an aesthetically charged political act 'attuned to the dangers of simple inscriptions' that can 'welcome new contexts without reiterating existent narratives and [...] allow[s] openings that potentially foster new conditions of possibility' (Bell, 2016: 10). Over the next 100 years, will the red poppy continue to exist as threshold of and barrier to the possibility of a complex, participatory and de-regulated mnemonic imagination? The British state's affective-political investment in the red poppy has escalated in the first two decades of the 21st century. The mobilization of compliant aesthetic and cultural activities that further embed the red poppy's monolithic message are strategically central to this intensification. Artistic works such as Ritchie's, which re-open the poppy as *a social wound* and puncture its coherence, remain minor yet vital aesthetic-cultural actions that keep imaginations of contestation alive.

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